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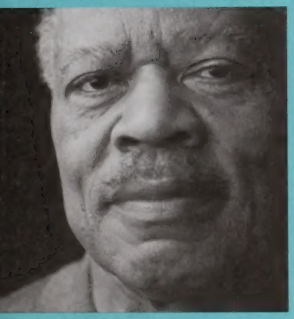
# AiSH

Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped

# Renewing AISH

Ensuring AISH is available into the future
for Albertans who need it



## DISCUSSION GUIDE

Please return your response
by November 30, 2004

Alberta

September 2004

*Dear Albertan:*

The Honourable Clint Dunford, Minister of Alberta Human Resources and Employment, recently established a Government MLA Committee to review the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) program.

AISH provides income support for Albertans who have a permanent disability that severely impairs their ability to earn a living. The program provides financial benefits to the person with the disability, and comprehensive health benefits for them and their immediate family members.

Through this review, we want to identify ways to renew AISH so it better meets the needs of people receiving AISH, while ensuring the program is affordable and remains available to Albertans who need it.

In our role as MLAs, we have heard from many people about their experiences with AISH and what they feel needs to be done to improve the program. As well, several consultations have been done by disability organizations during the past few years that identified ways the AISH program could be changed. The Alberta government's Low-Income Programs Review and the Alberta Disability Strategy also talked about issues facing AISH.

The committee has reviewed all of this information and wants your input on how to renew the AISH program. The issues facing the program are complex and will need thoughtful consideration. I urge you to take the time to read this Discussion Guide and provide your response on the attached questionnaire, by **November 30, 2004**. Once the feedback has been compiled, the committee will make recommendations to the Minister of Alberta Human Resources and Employment.

The committee looks forward to hearing your views on the AISH program. Your feedback is extremely important to us. Thank you.

Government MLA AISH Review Committee:

**Thomas A. Lukaszuk (Chair)**
*MLA Edmonton Castle Downs*

**Alana DeLong**
*MLA Calgary Bow*

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For **additional copies** of this discussion guide please call 310-4455, or if you have a TTY phone call 1-800-232-7215, or visit the AISH Review website at www.aishreview.gov.ab.ca to download and print a copy.

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## Other Reports

- Minister's Employability Council
  ***www3.gov.ab.ca/hre/pdf/mecfinal.pdf***
- MLA Committee to Review Low-Income Programs
  ***www.gov.ab.ca/hre/lir***
- Alberta Disability Strategy
  ***www.cd.gov.ab.ca/helping_albertans/premiers_council/ads***

# Introduction

Some Albertans with disabilities need support from government to fully participate in all aspects of society. Through the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) program, the Alberta government ensures that Albertans with severe disabilities have income to meet their basic needs. This is one of many Alberta government programs that support persons with disabilities.

The AISH program is for Albertans who have a permanent disability that severely impairs their ability to earn a living. AISH provides a financial benefit to the person with the disability, and comprehensive health benefits for them and their immediate family members. The maximum financial benefit is $850 per month, and the health benefit is worth on average $300 per month. Only three provinces (Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario) have a separate income support program for persons with disabilities.

The last government review of AISH was in 1999. Since that time, many individuals and disability organizations have identified issues with the AISH program and have suggested ways to change AISH. The Alberta government wants the program to meet the needs of people who need it, while ensuring the program is affordable into the future.

Determining how to best meet the needs of people on AISH means listening to Albertans who are receiving AISH benefits, their families, disability organizations and other Albertans. This discussion guide builds on issues and solutions that have been identified over the past several years. Through this guide, Albertans are being asked to comment on ideas to renew the program and to share their personal experiences with AISH.

As part of the AISH review, the Minister has also asked the department of Alberta Human Resources and Employment to look at other concerns that have been raised by AISH clients and disability organizations. These include reviewing how the AISH program is being delivered to ensure it is efficient and client-focused, and continuing to look at ways to remove barriers for people on AISH so they can better access employment and training opportunities. Findings on these items will also be presented to the Minister for consideration as part of renewing the AISH program.

# Information about AISH

### Albertans with Disabilities

- There are currently about 205,000 Albertans with disabilities between the ages of 18 and 64 – approximately 6.4% of our population.
- More than 75,000 (or 2.4%) of Albertans have a severe disability.
  - Approximately 43,500 (or 1.4%) of Albertans who have a severe disability have other sources of income and are independent of AISH.
  - About **31,500 (or 1%)** of Albertans are currently receiving AISH benefits.

*Source: Participation and Limitation Survey (2001)*

## The AISH Program

AISH started in 1979 when the Alberta government saw the need to create a program for Albertans with severe disabilities that was beyond the basic welfare system. Some people believe that any Albertan who has a severe disability should automatically receive AISH. That is not the purpose of AISH. It is a benefit for people with a permanent and severe disability who are unable to support themselves.

Principles guiding the AISH program are stated in the *AISH Act*:

- people on AISH want to be full participants in society
- individuals, families, communities, business, labour and government share responsibility for removing barriers to enable full participation and maximize independence of people receiving AISH

The Act also states that the Government of Alberta is committed to:

- providing financial assistance to people with severe disabilities whose resources are insufficient to meet basic needs
- providing access to employment training programs and services to people on AISH to enhance their ability to become employed
- balancing the needs of people who receive AISH with accountability to Alberta taxpayers

## Who receives AISH?

People on AISH are Albertans between 18 and 64 years old who have a permanent disability that severely limits their ability to earn a living and support themselves.

There are currently approximately 31,500 Albertans receiving AISH benefits.

- About 45% have various physical disabilities, 32% have mental illness, and 23% have developmental disabilities.
- About 37% are between the ages of 18 and 39, 52% are 40 to 59 and 11% are 60 to 65.
- 92% are single with no dependent children.
- About half have no other sources of income.
- 89% have less than $10,000 in assets.
- Just over 2% are in a long-term care facility.

## What do AISH benefits include?

AISH includes a maximum cash payment of up to $850 per month, and a comprehensive health benefit worth on average $300 per month. The health benefit includes:

- premium-free Alberta Health Care Insurance
- Alberta Aids to Daily Living co-pay fees
- prescription drugs
- optical care
- dental care
- emergency ambulance services
- essential diabetic supplies.

## What if someone leaves AISH?

People who leave AISH because of employment income or increased Canada Pension Plan-Disability income may continue to receive the health benefit. Ongoing eligibility for the health benefit is reviewed every year and is based on household income.

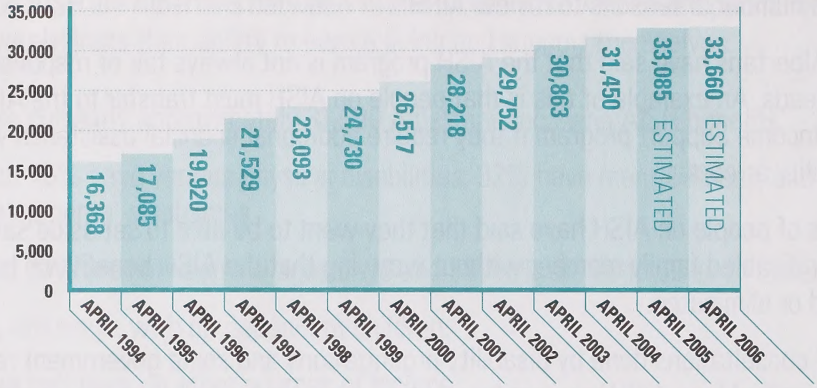
People who leave AISH for employment can return to AISH automatically within two years if their job is unsuccessful. They do not have to go through the full AISH application process again.

## Why review AISH?

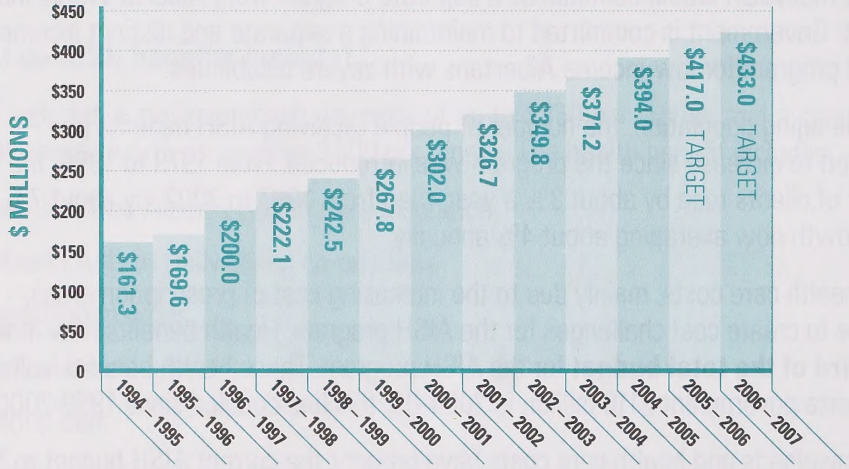
There are a number of reasons to review AISH:

- Some Albertans have said that the AISH program is not always fair or responsive to client needs. An example of this is that people on AISH must transfer to the Alberta Works Income Support program if they require additional financial assistance with their utility arrears.
- Families of people on AISH have said that they want to be able to set aside savings for their disabled family member without worrying that the AISH benefit will be reduced or eliminated.
- Several consultations done by disability organizations and some government reports have identified how AISH may not be meeting everyone's needs and have suggested ways to change the program.
- Following the Low-Income Programs Review in 2001, the Alberta government decided that AISH would continue as a separate program from Alberta Works Income Support. Government is committed to maintaining a separate and distinct income support program for low-income Albertans with severe disabilities.
- With the aging population, the number of people receiving AISH benefits has continued to increase since the program was introduced. From 1979 to 1996, the number of clients rose by about 3% a year, then from 1997 to 2002, by about 7%, with growth now averaging about 4% annually.
- Rising health care costs, mainly due to the increasing cost of prescription drugs, continue to create cost challenges for the AISH program. Health benefits now make up **one-third of the total budget** for the AISH program. These health benefits will cost the Alberta government $118 million in 2004-05; this has doubled since 1999-2000.
- Rising caseloads and health care costs have brought the current AISH budget to $394 million – a $20 million or 5% increase over last year.

## Number of People Receiving AISH




## AISH Costs




- The Alberta government is required to commence a review of the AISH Act this fall.
- The government wants to ensure the AISH program is responsive and affordable, and continues to be available to support people who need it, especially those who have no other resources.

# Ideas to Consider

During the past few years, there have been several government and stakeholder-led reports and consultations that talk about AISH. These include:

- Minister's Employability Council (***www3.gov.ab.ca/hre/pdf/mecfinal.pdf***),
- MLA Committee to Review Low-Income Programs (***www.gov.ab.ca/hre/lir***),
- Alberta Disability Strategy (***www.cd.gov.ab.ca/helping_albertans/premiers_council/ads***),
- and recommendations from disability organizations and stakeholder groups.

The Alberta government has reviewed these recommendations and is looking for your input on ideas regarding the future direction of AISH. The Government MLA AISH Review Committee will be making recommendations to the Minister of Alberta Human Resources and Employment on how to change AISH, to make it more responsive to individual needs, while ensuring the program continues to be affordable. We are seeking input from you and other Albertans to help us make the right choices.

Please read the following six questions and provide your input on the tear-out questionnaire at the end of this guide. **The deadline for submissions is November 30, 2004.**

**Question 1: If the AISH benefit were to increase, which of the following two options do you think is more fair:**

**a) give an increase to everyone on AISH but give a larger increase to people who have no other income, OR**

**b) give the same increase to everyone on AISH.**

*(To answer this question, go to page 15)*

Decisions on benefit increases are made as part of the government's annual budgeting process. A $10 increase in the monthly benefit level for everyone on AISH would result in an additional cost to the AISH program of about $4 million a year.

Alberta's AISH program is one of the most generous of its type in Canada. The maximum benefit is **$850** per month, plus comprehensive health benefits worth on average **$300** a month.

Here is how Alberta's benefit rate compares to rates in other provinces:

| Benefit Rates for a Single Person with a Disability | |
|---|---|
| **Ontario** | **$930** ($516 for basic needs + $414 for shelter) |
| **British Columbia** | **$786** ($461 for basic needs + $325 for shelter) |
| **Other Provinces** (average) | **$660** |

*Notes:*

- *In Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, PEI and Newfoundland, low-income people with a disability access general welfare programs.*
- *The above dollar amounts do not include health benefits.*
- *Ontario and B.C. both have supplemental benefits, in addition to the benefits for basic needs and shelter.*

Many Albertans have suggested that the AISH financial benefit should increase, particularly for the most needy. Given caseload growth and increasing health costs for people on AISH, the Alberta government needs to balance increasing the AISH benefit with ensuring the program remains affordable over the long-term.

Almost half of the people on AISH have other sources of income, such as employment income or income from insurance settlements or investments. But for more than half of the people receiving AISH, this is the only income they have.

**Question 2: Should AISH increase its employment earnings exemption for people who can work?**

*(To answer this question, go to page 15)*

Over 4,000 (13%) of people receiving AISH are employed. As people earn more money and become more financially independent, the amount they receive from AISH is reduced. With this combination of AISH and **employment income**, people have more money overall.

AISH allows a portion of a person's earnings to be exempt, meaning it does not affect their AISH benefit. The following table shows how much employment income is exempt and the total employment income a person can have while continuing to receive AISH.

Once a person's employment income exceeds the amounts noted below, they **may keep their health benefits** but lose their monthly AISH payment.

| | **Single person** | **Couple or person with a dependent child** (or children) |
|---|---|---|
| **Employment earnings that are exempt** (Do not affect AISH benefit) | **$200** | **$775** |
| **% of earnings over $200/$775 that are also exempt** | **25%** | **25%** |
| **Maximum monthly combined employment / AISH income allowed** | **$1,332** | **$1,907** |

*Notes:*

- *The maximum monthly income noted above is a combination of only **employment earnings** and the AISH financial benefit.*
- *The maximum income allowed for individuals or families who have other types of income such as Canada Pension Plan–Disability, Old Age Security or Workers' Compensation payments will be different.*

Increasing employment earnings exemptions to a higher level or changing the percentage at which earnings affect AISH benefits would:

- encourage people to earn more employment income without the worry of reducing or losing their AISH cash benefit; and,
- allow them to have more money each month.

About 2,300 (7%) of people receiving AISH earn more than $200 a month in employment income and would benefit from a change. The remaining clients who are unable to work would not benefit from this change.

**Question 3: What amount of savings should individuals or families be able to have before they are no longer eligible for AISH?**

*(Note: Savings includes assets and trusts. Savings are in addition to a home, vehicle and a second adapted vehicle, as these items are exempt assets under the AISH Act).*

*(To answer this question, go to page 16)*

## Assets

One factor in determining whether someone is eligible for AISH is the amount of savings or "assets" they have. Assets include cash, investments, property and businesses – anything that can be sold or converted to cash.

Currently, people applying for AISH can have up to **$100,000** in assets and still be eligible for AISH. **In addition, they can own a home, a vehicle, and a second vehicle adapted for their disability, without it affecting their AISH benefit.**

- 89% of people on AISH have less than $10,000 in assets
- 9% have between $10,000 and $50,000 in assets
- 2% have between $50,000 and $100,000 in assets

## Trusts

Some families have told us they want to be able to set up a trust for a family member with a disability, without risk of their family member losing AISH benefits. Some feel that people should be able to have trusts **in addition** to up to $100,000 in assets, and still be eligible for AISH.

One example of how a trust could work is that a family member could put money into a trust that could be withdrawn by the person on AISH to help pay for disability related expenses.

## What Other Provinces Do

Although most provinces provide income support for persons with disabilities as part of their welfare programs, Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario have a separate income support program for persons with disabilities. Following is a comparison of asset and trust limits these provinces use in determining eligibility for their programs.

| **Asset Levels** | |
|---|---|
| British Columbia Employment Assistance for Persons with Disabilities program | $3,000 (singles)<br>$5,000 (couple) |
| Ontario Disability Support Program | $5,000 (singles)<br>$7,500 (couple + $500 for each dependent) |
| Alberta's AISH program | $100,000 |
| **Trust Limits** | |
| British Columbia EAPD program | $100,000 |
| Ontario ODSP program | $100,000 |
| Alberta's AISH program | $0 |

The Alberta Government recognizes that AISH clients and families want to save and plan for their future. The government needs to balance this with ensuring that AISH is available to support those most in need.

**Question 4: Should the government look at providing health benefits to low-income people who qualify for AISH medically, but whose income and assets are too high for them to qualify?**

*(To answer this question, go to page 16)*

Albertans with disabilities have asked why they have to be on AISH to get health benefits paid for by the government. In some cases, lower income persons with disabilities need health coverage but not the AISH financial benefit. The Alberta Government recognizes that these people may have too much income and too many assets to qualify for AISH, but not enough to pay for their high cost prescriptions or other health needs.

Currently, health benefits are only available to people who are on AISH, or people who leave AISH because they are no longer eligible due to employment income or Canada Pension Plan-Disability income that is over the AISH allowable amount. These health benefits are listed on page 4.

Expanding these health benefits would mean that people with a severe disability who meet AISH medical eligibility, and are within a certain income and asset range, would get help with their health costs.

**Question 5: Should government review medical eligibility for some people after they have been on AISH for a period of time?**

*(To answer this question, go to page 17)*

Advances in medical technology are enabling some persons with disabilities to go to work and become more independent. As well, skills training and employment opportunities are becoming more available for persons with disabilities.

Reviewing medical eligibility would ensure that the Albertans receiving AISH are the people who need it most.

People with certain types of disabilities would be exempt from regular medical reviews, such as those in long-term care.

The Alberta government would pay the cost of the medical reviews so there would be no cost for people receiving AISH.

**Question 6: Should AISH provide additional benefits to meet people's needs, beyond the $850 cash benefit and health coverage?**

*(To answer this question, go to page 17)*

Currently, to get additional benefits that AISH does not provide, such as special diets or utility arrears, people receiving AISH must apply for Alberta Works Income Support. They must meet different eligibility criteria before they can be considered for these benefits. They must apply for these benefits in person, which can be time-consuming and inconvenient for some people.

One way to eliminate the need for AISH clients who require extra benefits from having to apply for Alberta Works Income Support would be to include additional benefits under the AISH program. These benefits might include:

- Special diet expenses
- Utility arrears
- Escaping family violence (for example assistance to set up a new household)
- Employment training and travel
- Emergency travel (for example emergency transportation to hospital)
- Non-emergency travel (for example medical appointments)
- Children's school expenses
- Medical/surgical supplies (for example orthopedic shoes, wheelchair repairs)

The cost to the AISH program would depend on the number of additional benefits provided.

# Next Steps

The deadline for submitting your feedback is **November 30, 2004**. Once the feedback has been compiled, the Government MLA AISH Review Committee will analyze the feedback, prepare a report, and make recommendations for changes to the AISH program to the Minister of Alberta Human Resources and Employment.

Once the consultation is completed, information will be posted on the AISH Review website, at ***www.aishreview.gov.ab.ca***.

# Tear Out Questionnaire

## Tell us what you think.

Please indicate your response to each question by checking (✓) in the appropriate box

*The deadline for submissions is **November 30, 2004**.*

**Question 1: If the AISH benefit were to increase, which of the following two options do you think is more fair:**

**a) give an increase to everyone on AISH but give a larger increase to people who have no other income, OR**

**b) give the same increase to everyone on AISH.**

*(Refer to page 8 for details)*

☐ a) ☐ b) ☐ NO OPINION

*Comments:* _____

_____

**Question 2: Should AISH increase its employment earnings exemption for people who can work?**

*(Refer to page 9 for details)*

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ NO OPINION

*Comments:* _____

_____

**Question 3: What amount of savings should individuals or families be able to have before they are no longer eligible for AISH?**

*(Note: Savings includes assets and trusts. Savings are in addition to a home, vehicle and a second adapted vehicle, as these items are exempt assets under the AISH Act).*

*(Refer to page 10 for details)*

☐ UP TO $10,000 ☐ UP TO $30,000 ☐ UP TO $50,000
☐ UP TO $70,000 ☐ UP TO $100,000 ☐ NO OPINION

*Comments:* _____

_____

**Question 4: Should the government look at providing health benefits to low-income people who qualify for AISH medically, but whose income and assets are too high for them to qualify?**

*(Refer to page 12 for details)*

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ NO OPINION

*Comments:* _____

_____

**Question 5: Should government review medical eligibility for some people after they have been on AISH for a period of time?**

*(Refer to page 12 for details)*

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ NO OPINION

*Comments:* _____

_____

**Question 6: Should AISH provide additional benefits to meet people's needs, beyond the $850 cash benefit and health coverage?**

*(Refer to page 13 for details)*

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ NO OPINION

*Comments:* _____

_____

## What Are Your Priorities?

Of the six ideas presented in this document, which are the **three** most important to you? Please write the **letter of your first, second and third priorities** in the box.

| 1st Priority: Idea | 2nd Priority: Idea | 3rd Priority: Idea |
|---|---|---|
| | | |

**a)** Ensuring that any future AISH benefit increase is applied fairly.

**b)** Increasing employment earnings exemption for people who can work.

**c)** Determining the amount of savings individuals or families can have before they are no longer eligible for AISH.

**d)** Providing health benefits separately from financial benefits.

**e)** Reviewing medical eligibility of some people on AISH after they have been on AISH for a certain period of time.

**f)** Providing additional benefits to meet people's needs, beyond the $850 cash benefit and health coverage.

*Please indicate if you have another priority, not listed above.*

**Do you have a personal story about AISH that you would like to share with us, or any other comments?**

## Are You ...

*(Please check all that apply to you)*

☐ an AISH client

☐ a family member of an AISH client

☐ a representative of a disability organization

☐ someone who works with AISH clients

☐ other _____

*There are several ways you can provide your response:*

- Mail it in the **postage pre-paid envelope** included with this discussion guide, (to Alberta Human Resources and Employment, 10557-108 Street NW, Edmonton, Alberta T5H 9Z9).
- Fax it to (780) 644-7393, or to connect toll-free, first dial 310-0000 then the fax number.
- Drop off your response at your nearest AHRE office. Call 310-0000 for the office nearest you.
- Or submit your response online through the AISH Review website ***www.aishreview.gov.ab.ca***

# Message from the Minister

Thank you for reading this discussion guide and taking the time to respond to the questions.

This year marks the AISH program's 25th year. The Government of Alberta is committed to meeting the needs of Albertans with disabilities into the future. Your input is critical to make sure AISH meets the needs of people with a permanent disability who cannot work to support themselves. We appreciate that the best solutions for AISH are likely to come from people who know the program best, and value the comments, ideas, and personal stories that you provide.

Together with the responses to this discussion guide, there will be two public sessions in Calgary and Edmonton in October. Based on the information collected, the Government MLA AISH Review Committee will make recommendations. The recommendations will then be taken through the government's internal process in the spring.

**Clint Dunford**
*Minister, Alberta Human Resources and Employment*

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## Tell Us What You Think

Thank you for taking the time to read this discussion guide and provide your input on the ideas presented.

There are several ways you can provide your response:

- Mail it in the **postage pre-paid envelope** included with this discussion guide, (to Alberta Human Resources and Employment, 10557-108 Street NW, Edmonton, Alberta T5H 9Z9).
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If you need help completing this guide or have any **questions** about the AISH Review, please call 1-866-262-9731 or in the Edmonton area call 644-7438.

*Please return your response by November 30, 2004.*

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